

## 9 Performing Mexico

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Contemporary Mexican theatre displays border tension, tension between the Federal District, home to Mexico City, and what is known as the “interior,” the vastly differing territories that reach, and flow beyond, Mexico’s borders with Central America and the United States. In the age of globalization, borders appear to be crumbling before our eyes, falling to cultural, economic, and political pressure. Yet geopolitical borders, which have come to seem so porous, are anything but porous for many Mexicans. They wait in endless lines at the U.S. embassy only to be denied visas or attempt to cross — through deserts, over walls made of steel landing strips used by the U.S. military in Desert Storm, and past the ever-increasing presence of the Border Patrol — Mexico’s northern border to “el otro lado,” the other side, much of which was Mexican territory before 1848. The divisions between Mexico City and the rest of the country are equally extant: Mexico has a long history of centrist control that often silences the voices, both cultural and political, of the margins. Conceptual borders also appear to be crumbling as power centers are destabilized by voices from the periphery; nevertheless, barriers seem to be reconstructed as soon as they are defied, and progressive forces, despite preliminary moves toward a more open, democratic society, seem to be fighting an uphill battle. Of the myriad themes that can be used to understand Mexican theatre and the writing of Mexican theatre histories, the metaphor of the border proves fruitful for considering the reshaping of theatre canons, the iconoclastic Mexico City playwrights who question conceptual boundaries, and the challenges to the centrist forces of Mexico City by theatre from the “interior” — including the political performances of the Zapatistas in and beyond Chiapas.

In their introduction to *The Postmodern Debate in Latin America*, John Beverly and José Oviedo question, as have many others, the appropriateness of using the term *postmodern* in relation to Latin America:

"There is something about the very idea of a Latin American postmodernism that makes one think of that condition of colonial or neocolonial dependency in which goods that have become shopworn or out of fashion in the metropolis are, like the marvels of the gypsies in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, exposed to the periphery, where they enjoy a profitable second life."<sup>1</sup> Cautious consideration of the "postmodern turn," which can lead to the prognosis of the end of all ideologies (except, of course, "liberal democracy," as Francis Fukuyama and others have argued) or to the destabilization of power centers, can be a fruitful line of inquiry.<sup>2</sup> Martín Hopenhayn refers to postmodernism as a "package of euphemisms to dress up the neoliberal project of cultural hegemony." He also notes,

It is more seductive to talk about diversity than the market, about desire than the maximization of profits, about play than conflict, about personal creativity than the private appropriation of the surplus. . . . It is more seductive to speak in favor of autonomy than against planning, or in favor of the individual than against the state. . . . In this way, the social contradictions of capitalism, accentuated on the Latin American periphery, disappear behind the exaltation of forms and languages.<sup>3</sup>

As with neoliberalism, the appropriation of the postmodern push cuts both ways and carries multiple messages. Just as many embrace neoliberalism (but not neoliberal economics) for its championing of individual liberty, many embrace the destabilizing forces of postmodern ideology as a weapon to counter the monologic of the borders that are anything but natural. Despite his critical approach to postmodernism, Hopenhayn argues that "positions such as the passion for the present, aestheticism, the exaltation of diversity, the rejection of ethnocentrism, the desire for open societies, the return to pluralist individualism, cultural polymorphism, and the prioritization of creativity can be adapted to political projects of another kind."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in Mexican theatre and theatre criticism, this has been the case; without ceding the possibility of agency, both follow a path of denaturalizing the status quo, of challenging the reality effects of not-so-imaginary borders.

Recent plays and theatre histories respond to and critique hegemonic power centers, conceptual and geographical borders. Along with this de-centering come histories that do not focus on the possibility of capturing

the “essence” of Mexican theatre; rather, there has been a flowing forth of specialized histories, articles, and monographs that grapple with themes more narrow in scope than previous, seemingly all-encompassing works such as Antonio Magaña Esquivel and Ruth S. Lamb’s 1958 *Breve historia del teatro mexicano* (Brief History of Mexican Theater); Antonio Magaña Esquivel’s 1964 *Medio siglo de teatro mexicano: 1900–1961* (A Half-Century of Mexican Theater: 1900–1961); John B. Nomland’s 1967 *Teatro mexicano contemporáneo: 1900–1950* (Contemporary Mexican Theater: 1900–1950); and Yolanda Argudín’s 1985 *Historia del teatro en México: Desde los rituales prehispánicos hasta el arte dramático de nuestros días* (The History of Theatre in Mexico: From Pre-Hispanic Rituals to Present-Day Dramatic Art).<sup>5</sup> As these titles suggest, theatre historians hoped to mold a panoramic view of Mexican theatre that often subtly affirmed the project of postrevolutionary nation building, promoting, through titles and content, the idea of a unified country. There is also an emphasis on finding the local origins of Mexican plays, either by tracing theatre to its Aztec roots or by focusing on the innovators of the twentieth century or both. Yolanda Argudín, for example, explains that “the history of Mexican theater is very short, just like the history of our young country.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, while the first chapter of her text is on pre-Columbian rituals, and subsequent chapters span five centuries of theatre in Mexico, for Argudín the “roots” of current theatre are to be found in the 1920s, specifically with the Teatro de Ulises, which, ironically, staged primarily European plays.

Mexican theatre histories illustrate a trend that began, according to Guillermo Schmidhuber de la Mora, after the 1947 publication of Rodolfo Usigli’s *El gesticulador* (The Gesticulator).<sup>7</sup> Following the period during which theatre chronicles were the most important source of information on theatre productions in Mexico (1821–1916) and the period during which theatre criticism was generally not separated from literary criticism in general (1917–1946), Schmidhuber writes of post-Usiglian specialized theatre criticism: “With the advent of foreign critical interest . . . in Mexican theater [come] numerous books and articles by professionals who possess academic training and critical tools.”<sup>8</sup> Within this last category, in the years since the publication of *El gesticulador*, theatre criticism has moved from the sweeping manuals listed above, which often included the “entire” history of Mexican theatre, to studies that favor theoretical, thematic approaches focusing on a small number of authors and texts. Two excellent examples of this trend are Enrique

Mijares's 1999 *La realidad virtual del teatro mexicano* (The Virtual Reality of Mexican Theater) and Gastón A. Alzate's 2002 *Teatro de Cabaret: Imaginarios Dididentes* (Cabaret Theater: Dissident Imaginaries).<sup>9</sup> When present-day chronological or generational studies are published, they combine analysis, valuation, and a more limited time period than previous works, as in the case of Ronald D. Burgess's 1991 *The New Dramatists of Mexico: 1967–1985*<sup>10</sup> and Guiellermo Schmidhuber de la Mora's 1999 *El adventimiento del teatro mexicano: años de esperanza y curiosidad*, which covers the period 1922–1938. Given the rich past of theatre criticism, it also follows that authors of more recent studies will turn to their predecessors with an eye toward filling in perceived gaps, reevaluating positions, and reviewing past plays in a new light. Thus, there are two main strands of Mexican theatre criticism — both of which call into question established borders — on which I would like to focus: the reconsideration of the canon(s) of Mexican theatre and the evolution of recent plays, which generally, but not always, is mirrored in present-day theatre criticism. Before turning to the centrifugal forces seen on the recent stage, I will focus on the reevaluation of plays related to two key historical events, the Mexican Revolution and the Tlatelolco massacre.

Traditionally, Mexican theatre histories highlight Mexico City and, more specifically, they signal twentieth-century playwright Rodolfo Usigli as the foundation of contemporary Mexican theatre. Willis Knapp Jones, for example, affirms that "According to [Usigli's] own self-evaluation, [he is] the writer who, almost on his own, created contemporary Mexican theater. Few would argue with this affirmation."<sup>11</sup> Seen as the "father" of Mexican theater, the central influence on contemporary writers, Usigli's impact has been remarkable. Yet his dominant position is also indicative of the centrist tendencies that often stifle the voices of the periphery. Kirsten Nigro, in "Twentieth-Century Theater," notes that "The problem of geographic destiny is a major one in Mexico, where the capital city dominates everything cultural and economic. For the theater, this has damning consequences, as playwrights are forced to migrate to Mexico City if they want a successful career."<sup>12</sup>

One of Mexico's most famous plays and the cornerstone of the U.S. canon of Mexican theatre is Usigli's *El gesticulador*. It takes place after the Revolution, during the years of political consolidation. The voice of dissatisfaction in the play comes from a professor of revolutionary history who has just lost his position in Mexico City and moved his fam-

ily to northern Mexico. His name, by coincidence, is the same as that of a hero of the Revolution — César Rubio. Rubio, the down-and-out professor, takes on the role of Rubio the revolutionary and, in the process of his own gestures of deception, exposes politicians as traitors to the Revolution: "Perhaps I am not the great César Rubio. But who are you? Who is each person in Mexico? They are all a bunch of gesticulating hypocrites."<sup>13</sup> Rubio later ends up murdered by his political rival and, ironically, becomes a martyr of the Revolution. Usigli's criticism of the Mexican government, seen in the above-quoted dialogue, is biting, and for this reason *El gesticulador* did not make it to the Mexican stage until 1947, nearly ten years after it was first published. Enrique Krauze explains that "the public welcomed it with great interest, but the government reacted violently. Some of its performances were canceled, and critics were paid to attack the play in the press."<sup>14</sup> The reaction of the government, as well as the public's response, affirm that *El gesticulador* rang true in the years after the Revolution; Usigli's play points to the disappointment felt by many Mexicans after the fighting stopped: the Revolution brought some changes, but in many ways the status quo was maintained well into the twentieth century.

Interestingly, one of the key characters in this play, Oliver Bolton, is a Harvard professor who "discovers" César Rubio. He repeatedly mentions that his flush institution would gladly buy any information Rubio is willing to sell and is quick to convince himself that he has found Rubio the revolutionary. He publishes his "research," including information he had promised not to reveal. Unlike Rubio the professor, he has the advantages of a university system with adequate funding and thus the possibility to make his voice heard. But he is equally dishonest, and his "revolutionary" work in the end serves only to strengthen his own career — not to mention the position of the regional leader who has Rubio murdered. My intent is not to suggest that the canon of Mexican theatre, like the "canon" of history to which Bolton contributes, has been maliciously created, deceptively designed to serve personal interests. However, it is interesting — and necessary — to consider the reality of the conceptual and geopolitical borders that separate Mexico and the United States and the ways people in the United States imagine Mexico as they reconsider the U.S. and Latin American canons of Mexican theatre.

Kirsten F. Nigro points out that "*El gesticulador* is rarely staged professionally in Mexico these days. Yet in North American [U.S.]

universities it is considered both a masterpiece and a living text, which surely says something about gaps between cultures and discrepancies in the criteria used in establishing the theatrical canon in Mexico.”<sup>25</sup> David William Foster, in the introduction to *Mexican Literature: A History* (1994), emphasizes the need to reassess Mexican literature, testing the limits of the canonical. In her chapter in Foster’s volume, Nigro does just this in her attempt to present a new view of Mexican theatre. She begins by “questioning the prelude” to twentieth-century theatre production by shedding light on the literary tradition that influenced Rodolfo Usigli. Her idea is not to challenge Usigli’s position in the canon; rather, she adds to the picture key predecessors that are generally acknowledged only in passing. She affirms that “because of its critical success and influence on subsequent playwrights, *El gesticulador* is seen as the one play that breaks with a theatrical past that for the most part is best forgotten” (220). By following the two main veins of twentieth-century Mexican theatre, experimentalism and socially committed realism, Nigro traces a new path for Mexican theatre history by restoring the artistic — and not merely practical — influence of the Teatro de Ahora:

It is from about 1925 on that all histories of Mexican theater begin to talk about renovators and experimenters, of the individuals and groups who worked hard to make of their country’s playwriting and play production a legitimate and critically acclaimed enterprise. . . . Some, like the Teatro de Murciélagos and the Teatro de Ahora, rather in the line of the Mexican muralists, wanted a serious national theater that would deal with the sociopolitical realities of Mexico’s past and present. . . . Although most histories give a critical nod to experimental efforts like that of [Teatro de] Ulises . . . , it is in fact the more realistic vein of theater that actually came to take hold of the Mexican stage in the 1940s and 1950s, a triumph that is attributed almost unanimously to one playwright — Rodolfo Usigli. (214–15)

Nigro’s reassessment of the Teatro de Ahora, which includes her analysis of Juan Bustillo Oro’s 1933 play *San Miguel de las Espinas* (*San Miguel of the Spines*), provides insight into the formation of canons. Nigro explains, “The failure to appreciate a play like *San Miguel de las Espinas* not only gives a false sense of the development of Mexican theater in general, but has also meant that traditionally Usigli’s *El gesticulador* has been con-

sidered both the first modern play and the only play of worth about the Mexican Revolution" (222).

If there is still a nationalist trend in Mexican theatre histories, it involves the desire, as seen in Nigro's reading of *San Miguel de las Espinas*, to redeem autochthonous origins. In her 1997 book *Perfil y muestra del teatro de la Revolución mexicana* (Profile and Examples of the Theater of the Mexican Revolution), Marcela del Río Reyes explains that the study of specific texts on the Revolution could "make it possible to appreciate what each text and each author has offered in the evolutionary process of an aesthetic that has rebelled . . . against cultural colonialism and the hegemonic canon of styles and models born in Europe."<sup>16</sup> To some extent, then, the information presented in major theatre histories is not what we might expect — it is now that the native roots of theatre are being traced within Mexico. It is now, long after the "revolutionary" government turned its back on the ideals of the Revolution in favor of another flawed foray into economic liberalism, that critics have begun to pay increased attention to local roots, to local influences.

The recent work of U.S. critic Jacqueline E. Bixler has also helped to fill in some of the gaps in literary histories, from which theatre itself is often marginalized. Different from the study of literary predecessors, plays on the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre of student protestors (by government forces during the Olympic games) point to the issue of censorship — not of the publication of plays but in the more subtle denial of the resources necessary to stage them. In her article on the 1968 massacre, "Re-Membering the Past: Memory-Theatre and Tlatelolco," Bixler affirms that all major studies on literature related to the Tlatelolco massacre, so named for the Plaza de Tlatelolco, where the bloodbath took place, completely ignore the vast dramatic production on this theme. Of the plays that were written soon after 1968, most were not staged because of indirect censorship that made it impossible, for example, to find a venue in which to stage such a play. Bixler explains that "consequently, the memories of Tlatelolco remained relatively unstaged until the 1980s, when Emilio Carballido, Adam Guevara, and Gabriel Inclán produced new plays that put those images on stage. More recently, a cycle of Tlatelolco plays was staged in Mexico City in October 1998 to commemorate the . . . massacre. Soon afterward . . . Felipe Galván published an anthology entitled *Teatro del 68*."<sup>17</sup> Until the 1980s, it was primarily

Tlatelolco that symbolized the unity of progressives in Mexico. In the 1980s and beyond, the numerous entities of the political left, as memories of Tlatelolco fade but are not forgotten, see neoliberal economic policies that favor the economic stratification of society — far removed from social liberalism — as the primary enemy of justice. Yet despite the urgency with which Mexican writers address the issue of neoliberalism, theatre historians have been almost silent on the theme. The Mexican Revolution, and even the Tlatelolco massacre, are distant enough to give us the crucial hindsight necessary for their analysis. Nevertheless, plays that respond to a new, neoliberal revolution, contradictory to the (albeit tainted) ideals of the Mexican Revolution, present perhaps the most remarkable theme on the recent stage.

Though many plays questioned postrevolutionary governments, it is possible to argue that during much of the seventy-one year rule of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI; Institutional Revolutionary Party), dramatists were many times in line with the revolutionary ideals championed by the ruling party. As faith in the PRI eroded over the years, however, the distance between the artistic community's vision and that of the government became more and more severe. This fissure has reached new heights in post-1982, neoliberal Mexico. No longer would a "leftist" paint murals on the walls of the National Palace; behind Diego Rivera's utopic paintings, in the offices of government officials, neoliberalism rules the stage. While artists often participated officially in postrevolutionary politics, as the years went by fewer and fewer progressive artists did so. Adam Versényi signals a recent example that underscores the situation under Vicente Fox. He says, Sabina Berman "is the commercially successful, critically acclaimed playwright who was seriously considered by President-elect Fox for the post of minister of culture in his new administration until she made clear her proabortion, feminist beliefs and enraged Fox's conservative backers."<sup>18</sup> While successive governments, including that of Vicente Fox, have continued to espouse revolutionary rhetoric, the neoliberal technocrats — following the economic recipe known as the Washington Consensus, and with the complicity of Mexican elites — took a different course. Kathleen Bruhn and Daniel C. Levy explain the importance of this shift: "In a world astonished by the fall of Soviet communism, it is easy to overlook the economic changes that have taken place in Mexico since 1982. Yet in their magnitude and rapidity, neoliberal reforms amount to little less than an



economic revolution.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, there are more billionaires in Mexico than ever before, but also more people living in extreme poverty.

In July 2002 Mexico’s towering president bent his body in reverence to kiss the ring of the Pope. The main performance of the Pope’s visit was the canonization of Juan Diego, the indigenous man whom the Vatican asserts had a vision of a dark-skinned Virgin Mary in the sixteenth century. Fox spoke of the visit as a spiritual revolution, and despite the illegality of his attendance at the canonization ceremony, expressly prohibited by law based on the constitution of 1917, he affirmed that he would be the only postrevolutionary president to attend a religious ceremony “without hiding.”<sup>20</sup> Fox, the first opposition leader in more than seven decades, is following — in terms of economic policies that favor reduced social spending, privatization of state-owned enterprises, and trade agreements that lower tariffs — the neoliberal footsteps of his PRI predecessors Carlos Salinas and Ernesto Zedillo. Neoliberal ideology, a flashback to the dictatorial days of Porfirio Díaz, who ruled Mexico for over three decades preceding the Mexican Revolution of 1910, has forever changed Mexican society.

Cracks in the armor of Mexico’s former ruling party, the party of the institutionalized revolution, had already appeared on key dates: the Tlatelolco massacre of students during prodemocracy demonstrations that coincided with the Mexico City Olympic games of 1968; the government’s inadequate response to a massive Mexico City earthquake in 1985; the fraudulent 1988 election of President Salinas (the records of which he later had burned);<sup>21</sup> and the zapatista uprising on New Year’s Day 1994. This uprising, in the name of Emiliano Zapata, the revolutionary leader who fought for indigenous rights, exploded onto Mexico’s political stage the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the neoliberal flagship because of its championing of the free market, became law in Mexico. Referring to one of the Zapatista leaders, the media-savvy Subcomandante Marcos, Enrique Krauze explains: “Marcos would have been about eleven years old in 1968, one of those about whom the student leader Eduardo Valle had prophesied: ‘The government of this country will have to be very wary of those who were ten or fifteen in 1968. . . . They will always remember the assaults upon, the murders of their brothers.’”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, pent-up frustration with the ruling party, not to mention the 1992 “celebration” of five centuries of oppression in indigenous communities, resulted in

a spilling over of collective memory, in a common cry, as the Zapatistas stormed Mexico's political stage with the words "Ya Basta" — Enough!

Revolutionary ideals were put to rest during the Salinas administration. Ernesto Zedillo, the last in a long line of PRI presidents, followed the neoliberal model that Salinas had shaped beginning in 1982 (as finance minister under President Miguel de la Madrid) while also opening the way, through significant electoral reforms, for the difficult path toward the democratization of Mexican politics. Instead of the left-leaning Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, from whom Salinas usurped the presidency in 1988, however, it was Vicente Fox from the National Action Party who came to power in 2000. With the election of Fox, the ruling party lost, at least temporarily, its political hegemony. Yet what remained unchanged was the driving force behind Mexico's economic revolution: a neoliberal ideology, which with Fox in power has been married with increased social conservatism.

Notwithstanding the rebirth of liberalism, there was another marriage in Mexico, another kiss that brings us to a different political stage — that of Mexico City performance artist Jesusa Rodríguez, who, in an extravagant ceremony complete with white (paper) wedding dresses, married her partner of twenty years, Liliana Felipe. The article in Mexico's leading progressive newspaper, *La Jornada*, in a perfect parody of nuptial news, noted: "it was just before ten on the night of February 14 when the priestess Claudia Hinojosa declared the happy couple, both in white, wife and wife."<sup>23</sup> Tim Weiner puts Jesusa Rodríguez's artistic production in the context of present-day Mexican politics:

When the sclerotic old regime that ran the country for 71 years lost the presidency to Mr. Fox last year, it might have been the sort of creative problem for Ms. Rodríguez that the end of the cold war posed for John le Carré. "It was difficult for me at first," she said. "Depressing." But the old regime and the new are pretty much Pepsi and Coke in her eyes, both offering people thirsty for justice "democracy lite." . . . "I realized the new government was the same, just worse," she said. "Same economic ambitions, but different ideology — more dangerous, with this perverse mix of religion and merchandising, this mystical attraction to money and power." . . . Ms. Rodríguez is part of a tradition in Mexico City that reaches back almost a century, to the tent shows, known as teatro de carpa, and

the political cabarets that served as a kind of living newspaper, written in the language of parody — endless puns and wordplay, savage caricatures and satirical songs. In her youth, in the 1950's and 60's, that tradition all but disappeared, folding under pressures that included the government's subtle censorship of politically deviant art and its sponsorship of creative artists who would work within acceptable limits. But in the early 1980's, Ms. Rodríguez and her life-long partner and creative collaborator, Liliana Felipe, began to revive it and to test those boundaries.<sup>24</sup>

Just as economic liberalism has returned to the stage, so have creative ways to subvert authority. This artistic revival of the 1980s, which coincides with the beginning of the neoliberal "revolution," has provided a powerful counterpoint to a system of beliefs that parallels religious fervor. Add to this economic ideology the socially conservative agenda of Fox, who represents the probusiness, proreligious National Action Party, and the stage is set for unprecedented, counterhegemonic theatrical activity. Mexican playwright and director Felipe Galván writes: "Neoliberalism has not led to positive changes, except perhaps in that it provokes the imagination to find ways to combat it in practice, to evade its barriers, to leap over it, to organize forms of transcendence with which to destroy it, something that will happen sooner or later. It is not possible to live this way, and humanity will overcome these barbarous technocrats."<sup>25</sup> The reaction to neoliberalism, combined with the postmodern desire to question center-periphery binaries, makes for a Mexican stage in revision, a stage on which authority is tested and contested and which represents a trend that will need to be acknowledged by future theatre historians.

Jesusa Rodríguez's play *Misa en Los Pinos* (Mass in Los Pinos) takes place in the presidential residence and was staged in 2001.<sup>26</sup> The set for *Misa en Los Pinos* (which includes, among other props, an altar/Coke cooler, four toilets with Coca-Cola bumper stickers on the cistern, and a podium/Coke refrigerator) leaves no doubt as to the anti-neoliberal sentiment felt by many Mexicans. Rodríguez uses English to subvert the image of U.S. economic hegemony. Indeed, with the change of one vowel, the famous brand name becomes Caca-Cola, as the huge banner on the back wall of the stage (and, it turns out, the bumper stickers on the toilets) proclaims. There are even English classes (at Bush University)

where the characters learn, through repetition, key words, oil being the most important. One of the most outstanding students at Bush University — where eager cabinet members sit on the toilets and recite words from a textbook developed by Laura Bush — is Jorge G. Castañeda, who is satirized for switching political parties to join the Fox administration and for his close ties to the U.S. This character's words remind the audience of the more intimate economic relationship (including the astonishing visit by the ultraconservative senator from North Carolina, Jesse Helms) that was furthered by the elections of Bush and Fox. The nature of this budding friendship is made clear when Castañeda shouts into his cellular phone, in a line that is not to be found in the published script, "If it's Jesse Helms, tell him yes to everything."

Many other Mexican playwrights have taken issue with neoliberal ideals in explicit ways. In his 1998 play *La Malinche*, for example, Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda directly attacks neoliberal policies.<sup>27</sup> In the opening scene of the play, the Spanish conquerors enter the stage. Yet instead of a repeat of sixteenth-century savagery, we have an eerie update: the soldiers are dressed like U.S. tourists in Cancún, a clear indication that the names have changed but the reality of foreign economic dominance has not. NAFTA is presented as another deadly, foreign plague in an endless line of fatal imports. When Malinche Joven (Young Malinche) and Malinche Vieja (Old Malinche) try to recall the plagues that have swept Mexico, the past becomes the present; plagues carry different names but always the same result. After listing diseases like smallpox and measles, they mention more recent, equally potent menaces: "But now, there are new plagues that are killing us. Halloween kills Day of the Dead. Mall kills flea market" (98).

Equally iconoclastic is Alejandra Trigueros's 1997 play *Muerte deliberada de cuatro neoliberales* (The Deliberate Death of Four Neoliberals), which parodies the pseudo-religious fervor of four students studying neoliberal doctrine at Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.<sup>28</sup> Boston provides a fitting context; the city has seen its share of technocrats in training, as Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw explain:

In the mid-1970s, for instance, Pedro Aspe, Mexico's future finance minister, was doing his Ph.D. at MIT, where the future finance minister of Chile, Alejandro Foxley, was a visiting professor, while Domingo Cavallo, the future finance minister of Argentina, was

writing his Ph.D. thesis at Harvard. They talked together and jogged together. . . . They met MIT faculty members Rudiger Dornbusch and Stanley Fischer, now deputy manager at the International Monetary Fund.<sup>29</sup>

Trigueros's neoliberal characters are the future Aspes and Zedillos of Mexico, and although *Muerte deliberada* takes place in present-day Boston, it clearly conjures up post-1982 Mexico. The neoliberal creed cited by the students of economics, while providing comic relief and biting satire, highlights the entrenched values of liberal economics among many Mexican elites: "I believe in Him, Adam Smith, the only son of the Economy, born of the Economy before all other economists."<sup>30</sup> The transposition of Catholicism and neoliberalism makes one thing clear: neoliberalism is based on beliefs, not opinions. The above mentioned plays that treat the theme of neoliberalism have been staged successfully, and while indirect censorship (e.g., the denial of funding and theatre space) is still relatively common, in general directors are able to stage plays that criticize the government. Jesusa Rodríguez, however, has experienced direct censorship as recently as the 1980s and proudly displays a threatening letter from the PRI "suggesting" that she ease her political attacks.

Mexico City author Sabina Berman also parodies neoliberal ideology (albeit in more subtle ways) in plays such as *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* (Between Villa and a Naked Woman), *Krisis (Crisis)*, and *La grieta* (The Crack).<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, she is best known for questioning gender roles and demythifying "natural" categories, providing iconoclastic themes that coincide with critics' increasingly theoretical approaches to Mexican theatre. Unlike plays that treat neoliberal ideology, Berman's gender-bending plays have been the subject of numerous studies, including a recently completed, unpublished collection of articles edited by Jacqueline E. Bixler: *Sediciosas seducciones: Sexo, poder y palabras en el teatro de Sabina Berman* (Seditious Seductions: Sex, Power, and Words in the Theatre of Sabina Berman). Berman's *El suplicio del placer* (The Agony of Ecstasy), a collection of four one-act plays published in 1994, presents a series of relationships that in one way or another challenge our perceptions of human relationships.<sup>32</sup> In one act, *El bigote* (The Moustache), Berman presents a "feminoid" male and "masculinoid" female who, depending on which of the two wears a detachable moustache, switch

gender roles. The conflation of the roles creates a temporary blurring of the fixity of gender, and at one point the stage directions indicate that the two characters speak lines interchangeably, leading to the possibility that the characters represent two gendered possibilities within each person: "I love you. You are me. . . . I am you" (177). Though critics often point out that the play questions the naturalness of gender, they also indicate that this subversion is temporary, that in the end the audience is left with only two plausible possibilities — the stereotypical male or the stereotypical female.

Another vignette in the same collection is *La casa chica* (The Love Nest<sup>33</sup>), in which Berman presents a stereotypically macho man (El) and his "kept woman" (Ella), whom he places in the same category as his many possessions. When Ella laughs, he scolds: "What are you laughing at? That was a joke. . . . When I insult you I want to see you suffer," at which time she practices the word *ay* until he is satisfied that she is suffering (181). His insults, and her act of submission, continue until the play comes to an end, when El slaps Ella and penetrates her. Shortly before, El had warned her that he would take her to "paroxysm." Indeed, the final act in her performance is an orgasmic shudder, though the multiple meanings of paroxysm — a shudder or spasm but also the "sudden increase or recurrence of symptoms" — point to an illness in society.<sup>34</sup>

Jacqueline E. Bixler notes that Berman "stylizes history to foreground its representation and to remind her audience that events from the past acquire their meaning through their representation, whether it be on the page or on the stage."<sup>35</sup> Though *La casa chica* does not take as its theme a specific event, the historicity of female-male relationships is highlighted through the overt performance of gender roles. Ella prepares for her role by getting dressed and putting on makeup, and El is able to "dramatize" her. As with *El bigote*, the exaggerated, self-conscious performance lays bare the mechanized "nature" of human relationships. Adam Versényi, in the introduction to his translation of this and other Berman plays, notes: "In *The Agony of Ecstasy* Berman's focus is upon the meaning of gender itself and, by extension, sexual politics."<sup>36</sup> Berman's *modus operandi* is to engage her audience politically, to lead us to question our own social roles; her work is representative of the direction of theatre in Mexico City, which is continuously pushing the limits of conceptual, political borders — a process that is mirrored in theatre criticism.

Kirsten Nigro explains, "There is another new theatrical voice in Mexico that is now, and probably will remain, both culturally and politically disenfranchised . . . the so-called *teatro gey* (gay theater)." <sup>37</sup> Since the publication of Nigro's text in 1994 it has become much more common to see *teatro gey* on the Mexican stage, and the *queering* of critical studies, which extends beyond *teatro gey*, has followed suit. In his study on Mexican cabaret performers published in 2002, Gastón A. Alzate notes, "in Mexico and Latin America there is a parallel system to hegemonic sexuality, a *queer* system that coexists with the heterosexual system." <sup>38</sup> Alzate's use of queer theory indicates that an important part of his theoretical framework is influenced by foreign forces, which points to a crucial dilemma similar to that faced by the use of feminist theory to analyze Latin American literature: to what extent do foreign formulas and theories distort the texts we analyze? For Alzate the answer is clear: "I use the term *queer* in this book because the Spanish language does not have its own term" (22). A *queer* reading allows Alzate to treat not only gay and lesbian sexuality, but also bisexual, transvestite, and transexual sexualities.

Alzate's study of Mexican performance artists includes the above mentioned Jesusa Rodríguez as well as Astrid Hadad, Paquita la del Barrio, Francis, and Tito Vasconcelos, all of whom question our conceptions of gender politics and national politics through sexually subversive performances that routinely draw large audiences in the capital. Alzate highlights the parallel between Berlin and Mexico City, both with the "birth" of the cabaret movement in the 1920s and the present-day rebirth of this genre in both cities (12). He explains the origin of this "boom" in Mexico: "it grows parallel not only next to the development of indigenous participation but also certain feminist organizations, or organizations that fight for homosexual rights. . . . The EZLN [Zapatista Army of Nacional Liberation] sent a communiqué in support of sexual diversity, with which it broke the clearly homophobic tradition of Latin America" (14). Alzate, in specific reference to Astrid Hadad, shows how artists and critics have been challenged to respond to the "*univocidad cultura*" (univocal culture) of social conservatism, a challenge that has also resonated beyond the borders of Mexico City.

Many Mexico City plays, including *El gesticulador*, actually are set in the "provinces"; Mexico City authors, for example, routinely write on themes related to the indigenous struggle for justice, most recently the

Zapatista uprising, in order to question the centrist forces of the country's political machine. Vicente Leñero, who along with Emilio Carballido and Hugo Argüelles forms what is often referred to as the "santísima trinidad" (most saintly trinity) of Mexican playwrights, treats the theme in his 1995 play *Todos somos Marcos* (We Are All Marcos).<sup>39</sup> Specifically, he focuses attention on the fissure among the political left in the country following the explosion of pent-up frustration among the various indigenous groups in the state of Chiapas. Leñero wrote the play for the *Teatro Clandestino* (Clandestine Theatre) series, which he and other Mexican authors established in order to stage current events. *Todos somos Marcos* was thus staged shortly after the Zapatista uprising in an effort to promote dialogue about the way intellectuals reacted to the neo-Zapatista movement. The play mirrors the divided reaction of the political left in Mexico; one of the protagonists, Laura, leaves to join the Zapatista movement, while her boyfriend, Raúl, is shown to be part of an increasingly stagnant, demoralized faction of the left. In addition to his dialogue, which at first is revolutionary but becomes more and more like the official communiqués of the Zedillo administration, Raúl's violent reaction to Laura's departure lets his political motives show through: Marcos has disrupted the political stage, but it is the domestic revolution — Laura's departure — that most displeases Raúl. Though Leñero himself is never optimistic regarding the ability of theatre to affect politics, it is clear that this type of *teatro urgente* (urgent theatre) — like the theater studied by Donald H. Frishman in his 1990 book *El teatro popular en México* (Popular Theatre in Mexico),<sup>40</sup> street theatre, and "teatro campesino," all of which can quickly stage current events — has often been neglected by theatre historians and is an area rich for further analysis.

Though the theme of the "provinces" has long been represented in plays from the capital, regional artists who refuse to make their home there have consistently suffered regional discrimination. Kirsten Nigro notes, "Although marginalized, this regional theater is nonetheless very much alive, and its exclusion from the canon gives a quite blinkered vision of theatrical life in Mexico as a whole. . . . For example, the peninsula of Yucatán has a long and rich theatrical history dating from pre-Columbian times, its real flourish beginning with the 1910 Revolution, when many theater artists fled the capital for safety in Yucatán."<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Sergio Magaña Esquivel affirms that there were more active theatres in the



Yucatán than in Mexico City by 1916–1917.<sup>42</sup> While many critics and historians signal some of the important writers who have migrated to Mexico City (e.g., Hugo Argüelles, Emilio Carballido, Luisa Josefina Hernández, Elena Garro, and Jorge Ibargüengoitia), many others who have not traveled to Mexico City continue to produce works worthy of study. Nigro, referring to the need for increased attention to border theatre, writes: “Not surprisingly, the [Mexico-U.S.] borderlands, like Yucatán, are seen from Mexico City as either cultural backwater or a place unconnected to the capital-city reality. Indeed, the prejudice against the *fronterizo* (Mexican who lives in the border zone), who rubs elbows with the U.S. . . . may well have something to do with the marginalization of this particular regional theater.”<sup>43</sup>

Despite the relatively limited critical attention paid to regional theatre, and despite the fact that many dramatists continue to travel to the capital to further their possibilities, the voices of regional authors who have not migrated to Mexico City are making themselves heard, and important work in this area is becoming more and more common. In addition to new studies like the issue of the journal *Autores* on regional authors, edited by George Woodyard, Enrique Mijares’s recent study, to give one example, responds to the hegemony of Mexico City theatre while contributing to the body of theoretical works by regional authors. In *La realidad virtual del teatro mexicano* (The Virtual Reality of Mexican Theatre), Mijares underscores the feeling of many people who live in regions other than Mexico City toward the self-centered attitude (“*ensimismamiento*”) of the federal government, past and present:

It is an incontrovertible fact that the self-centered attitude [of Mexico City authors] does not correspond, from any point of view, to what is happening in the rest of the republic, where in the provinces . . . we are still waiting for the federal pact, promised as the first quarter of the eighteenth century came to an end, to be fulfilled, we are still waiting to receive the promises of decentralization revived by the governments that supposedly represent the Revolution, we continue to suffer the havoc of the presidential hegemony of Zedillo.<sup>44</sup>

George Woodyard, in his prologue to Enrique Mijares’s study, notes that until the publication of Mijares’s critical text “one had not seen such a penetrating and comprehensive study of postmodern theater in

Mexico."<sup>45</sup> Not only is theatre in Mexico transforming, theatre criticism is responding to new themes in the theatre and, equally important, to new and varied theoretical perspectives, perspectives that have given rise to exciting studies on Mexican plays, past and present.

In his own theatre productions, which number over one hundred, Mijares, who lives and works in the northern state of Durango, focuses on the U.S.-Mexico border but also other themes, including the Zapatista uprising on Mexico's southern border. His play *Enfermos de esperanza* (Sick of Waiting), which won the prestigious Premio Tirso de Molina in 1997, treats the uprising from a decidedly proindigenous point of view and thus offers a necessary complement to Mexico City visions of the uprising. The voices of indigenous Chamulas from the state of Chiapas share the stage with Subcomandante Marcos, politicians, and journalists, among others. Through a series of distancing techniques, such as a spotlight that picks out Chamulas who are sitting among the audience and a television news program (one of many that painted the Zapatistas in a negative light) that plays through the intermission, the audience is drawn in to a web of complicity. At one point, the spectators are on the receiving end of a massacre; at another the Chamulas point their crude weapons toward the audience and fire, shattering the invisible fourth wall, as well as our desired feeling of innocence. The audience also shares seating with government officials as they plan the official story about, the official response to, the 1994 uprising. The rejection of a postmodern style in *Enfermos de esperanza*, though not in all of his dramatic works, underscores the social commitment of Mijares to the disenfranchised people of Mexico. Though *Enfermos de esperanza* takes place in Mexico's southern borderlands, Mijares's position on the Mexico-U.S. border often leads him to engage Mexico-U.S. politics. In the case of *Enfermos de esperanza*, one of the characters relays a specific warning to those on the other side of the border not to intervene militarily: "People of the United States: Don't stain your hands with our blood."<sup>46</sup>

The Zapatista movement, often represented by spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos, who himself has written in numerous genres, including drama, signals another area that needs further study in Mexican theatre history — performance, in the realm of politics (e.g., the Zapatista caravans to Mexico City), in cabarets such as those studied by Gastón A. Alzate, and so on. The thin line between formal theatre

and the theatre of politics was recently blurred, once again, when Comandante Estér, a Zapatista leader, addressed the Mexican Congress during a historical performance in which she demanded dignity for the indigenous people of Mexico. This courageous act by an indigenous woman reminds me of the opening scene of Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda's *La Malinche*, in which the title character stands before congress to demand that her name be included, in golden letters, among Mexico's heroes.<sup>47</sup> Fiction and politics mirror each other, on the stage of politics and on the political stage, resulting in performances that question pre-existing borders in order to denaturalize the status quo.

The study of twentieth-century Mexican theatre has taken two general paths: the reevaluation of the past and the study, under increasingly theoretical lenses, of present-day theatre, which itself is transforming as borders are drawn and redrawn. The focused theatre histories studied above, which now by far outnumber national theatre histories, many of which attempted to be all-encompassing and which without a doubt serve as an important foundation for present-day criticism, show the fragmented reality of Mexican theatre. At the same time, they leave room for dissension, for multiple perspectives, for the consideration of counterhegemonic voices that, in all their contradictions, bring us closer to Mexican theatre.

#### NOTES

① John Beverly and José Oviedo, eds., *The Postmodern Debate in Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 1.

2. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992).

3. Martín Hopenhayn, "Postmodernism and Neoliberalism in Latin America," in Beverly and Oviedo, eds., *Postmodern Debate in Latin America*, p. 100.

4. *Ibid.*, 101.

5. Antonio Magaña Esquivel and Ruth S. Lamb, *Breve historia del teatro mexicano* (Mexico City: Ediciones de Andrea, 1958); Antonio Magaña Esquivel, *Medio siglo de teatro mexicano: 1900–1961* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1964); John B. Nomland, *Teatro mexicano contemporáneo: 1900–1950* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1967); Yolanda Argudín, *Historia del teatro en México: desde los rituales prehispánicos hasta el arte dramático de nuestro días* (Mexico City: Panorama Editorial, 1985). All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

⑥ Argudín, *Historia del teatro en México*, p. 10.

7. Rodolfo Usigli, *El gesticulador, La mujer no hace milagros* (Mexico City: Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 1994).

8. Guillermo Schmidhuber de la Mora, *El adventimiento del teatro mexicano: años de esperanza y curiosidad* (San Luis Potosí: Editorial Ponciano Arriaga, 1999), p. 15.

9. Enrique Mijares, *La realidad virtual del teatro mexicano* (Mexico City: Ediciones Casa Juan Pablos, 1999); and Gastón A. Alzate, *Teatro de cabaret: imaginarios disidentes* (Irvine: Ediciones de GESTOS, 2002).

10. Ronald D. Burgess, *The New Dramatists of Mexico: 1967–1985* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991).

11. Willis Knapp Jones, *Breve historia del teatro latinoamericano* (Mexico City: Ediciones de Andrea, 1956), p. 171.

12. Kirsten F. Nigro, "Twentieth-Century Theater," in David William Foster, ed., *Mexican Literature: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

13. Usigli, *El gesticulador*, p. 107.

14. Enrique Krauze, *Biography of Power: A History of Modern Mexico, 1810–1996*, trans. Hank Heifetz (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 526.

15. Nigro, "Twentieth-Century Theater," p. 109. In large part, *El gesticulador's* position in the U.S. canon is practical — for years the published text has been readily available for use in university courses on Latin American theatre. Thematically, the play feeds the desire to imagine Mexico as a society of masked simulators, a topic Octavio Paz addresses in *El laberinto de la soledad* (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*).

16. Marcela del Río Reyes, *Perfil y muestra del teatro de la Revolución mexicana* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997), p. 9.

17. Jacqueline E. Bixler, "Re-Membering the Past: Memory-Theatre and Tlatelolco," *Latin American Research Review* 37 (2002): 121.

18. Adam Versényi, *The Theatre of Sabina Berman: The Agony of Ecstasy and Other Plays* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), xii.

19. Kathleen Bruhn and Daniel C. Levy, *Mexico: The Struggle for Democratic Development* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 177.

20. "La constitución permite ir a actos religiosos: Fox," *La Jornada* [newspaper on-line], July 31, 2002; available from [www.jornada.unam.mx/2002/jul02/020731/005n2pol.php?origen=index.html](http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2002/jul02/020731/005n2pol.php?origen=index.html), accessed February 4, 2003.

21. Krauze, *Biography of Power*, p. 770.

22. Ibid.

23. "Felices y núbias las contrayentes enlazaron sus vidas: Nupcias de Liliana y Desusa," *La Jornada* [newspaper on-line], February 16, 2001; available from <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2001/feb01/010216/056n1con.html>, accessed 4 February 2003.

24. Tim Weiner, "Pummeling the Powerful, with Comedy as Cudgel," *New York Times*, June 15, 2001, p. 4A.
25. Felipe Galván, e-mail interview by author, February 5, 2003.
26. Jesusa Rodríguez, *Misa en Los Pinos*, *GESTOS* 17 (2002): 119-41.
27. Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, *La Malinche* (Mexico City: Plaza and Janés, 2000).
28. Alejandra Trigueros, *Muerte deliberada de cuatro neoliberales*, in Stuart A. Day, ed., *Diálogos dramáticos: México Chile* (Puebla: Tablero IberoAmericano, in press).
29. Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw, *The Commanding Heights: The Battle between Government and the Marketplace That Is Remaking the Modern World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 240.
30. Trigueros, *Muerte deliberada de cuatro neoliberales*.
31. Sabina Berman, *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*, *Muerte súbita*, *El suplicio del placer* (Mexico City: Gaceta, 1994); Berman, *Krisis*, *Tramoya* 52 (1997): 51-100; and Berman, *La grieta*, in Day, *Diálogos dramáticos*.
32. Berman, *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*, *Muerte súbita*, *El suplicio del placer*.
33. The translation of this title comes from Versényi, *Theatre of Sabina Berman*, p. 10.
34. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 2nd ed.
35. Jacqueline E. Bixler, "From Ecstasy to Heresy: The Theatre of Sabina Berman," in Versényi, *Theatre of Sabina Berman*, p. xxiii.
36. Versényi, *Theatre of Sabina Berman*, p. xiii.
37. Nigro, "Twentieth-Century Theater," p. 230.
38. Alzate, *Teatro de Cabaret*, p. 22.
39. Vicente Leñero and Antonio Zúñiga, *Todos somos Marcos*, *Sol blanco* (Mexico City: Alborde Teatro, 1999).
40. Donald H. Frischmann, *El Nuevo teatro popular en México* (Mexico City: INBA/Centro Nacional de Investigación, 1990).
41. Nigro, "Twentieth-Century Theater," pp. 227-28.
42. Magaña Esquivel, *Medio siglo*, p. 17.
43. Nigro, "Twentieth-Century Theater," p. 228.
44. Mijares, *Realidad virtual*, p. 86.
45. George Woodyard, prologue to Mijares, *Realidad virtual*, p. 16.
46. Enrique Mijares, *Enfermos de esperanza* (Madrid: Ediciones de Cultura Hispánica, 1998), p. 29.
47. Rascón Banda, *La Malinche*, pp. 15-17.